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Rev. of "The Wallenstein Trilogy," directed by Peter Stein and starring Klaus Maria Brandauer.

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***Wallenstein* by Friedrich Schiller
directed by Peter Stein
production premiere: 19 May 2007 in Berlin**

Rarely has a new production of an old play attracted the kind of international attention as did the premiere of *Wallenstein: ein dramatisches Gedicht* (*Wallenstein: a dramatic poem*, usually translated as *The Wallenstein Trilogy*) by Friedrich Schiller, directed by Peter Stein and starring Klaus-Maria Brandauer. The refurbished main fermentation hall and cold storage warehouse of the defunct Kindl brewery in the working-class borough of Neukölln is admittedly an improbable venue for an occasion that attracted film and television celebrities, major government officials, sports stars, and serious theatre-goers from all over the country. These individuals furthermore knew what kind of arduous ordeal lay ahead of them: an eleven-hour extravaganza, endured on narrow metal seats, broken up by four intermissions. They awaited a trilogy most had read in high school, usually under compunction; not only were they compelled to read it, but they also had to memorize some of the play's better known passages. It contains some of Schiller's most elevated language and frequently quoted aphorisms: "The dictates of the heart are the voice of fate," "War is an unseemly, forceful handiwork," "I know my boys from Pappenheim!" or "When the wine goes in, strange things come out." Beyond the epigrammatic value of the play, the production featured the German theatre's most prominent director, who now finds himself on the margins of acceptability by the German theatre Establishment. It was also a commercial undertaking, incorporated (with some subsidy) as a legitimate enterprise, budgeted at about \$6.5 million. And yet it was scheduled to run only 28 performances and solely on week-ends. In other words, this production was more than just a well-publicized encounter between a director's vision for a cultural icon and the audience's expectations. It was an event.

Prior to the premiere, several cultural watchdogs in Germany had begun accusing the participants of attempting just that, an event that would essentially become a publicity stunt. Many claimed that director Stein, actor Brandauer, and even Claus Peymann (whose Berliner Ensemble functioned as co-producer, providing salaries for many of the actors, their costumes, and most of the production's publicity) were allowing show business values to intrude upon considerations of both art and cultural integrity. After all, this is a city whose financial situation is catastrophic. What business does Berlin have subsidizing a star turn, and for an aging star who is Austrian to boot, and whose days as a rogue hero are doubtless behind him?

The response to such questions lies with Stein's intentions for the production and ultimately with the achievement he attained in pulling the whole enterprise off successfully. The director saw distinct contemporary significance in the trilogy since, as he stated, Schiller's *Wallenstein* is a noteworthy description of political confusion. "It fits every situation, especially today," he stated. At the core of his directorial intention was Schiller's conception of Europe, which in the trilogy's second play *The Piccolomini* takes pride of place. In the long discursive deliberations of Wallenstein's lieutenant general of Octavio Piccolomini, Europe is an idea. It could become "the culmination of a striving for the welfare of all and the common weal, no longer the aggrandizement of one." Piccolomini is speaking of the Kaiser at the time, but ultimately (in *Wallenstein's Death*) the "aggrandizement of one," namely Wallenstein himself, becomes his target. Yet aggrandizement combined with superstition consumes nearly the whole of *The Piccolomini* and most of the trilogy's third play *Wallenstein's Death* before Piccolomini hits his bull's-eye. By that time, all striving has ceased, his son Max and Wallenstein's daughter Thekla are casualties of the conflict, and Wallenstein lies murdered in his own bed by Buttler, the Irish chief of Wallenstein's dragoon regiments.

In between have come a torrents of words, beginning with the trilogy's prelude (read by actor Walter Schiminger), followed by *Wallensteins Camp* in "knittel verse," rhymed couplets that are sung, preached, shouted, and murmured by an entire host of soldiers, hangers-on, and camp followers in a snow storm. The stage picture is indeed stunning, set on the entirety of the purpose-built Kindl stage, one measuring approximately 130 feet wide by about 80 feet in depth. Subsequent scenes lack the first one's ability to ravish the eye, since designer Ferdinand Wögerbauer's mobile and electrified wall units serve mostly to delimit the enormous stage space. That circumscription capacity is of course necessary at times, since many of the play's scenes have only two or three people. Technical director Uwe Arsand's stage crew were superbly rehearsed and trained for the job of getting over twenty major scene changes executed in relatively brief periods of time over what sometimes seemed like vast distances. The enormous stage space, combined with Schiller's poetic idiom, the lofty ideas he attempts to place in historical context, and the sheer weight and number of words make for a marathon that compares favorably with Stein's other lengthy productions.

They included a seven-hour 1971 staging of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, a nine-hour outdoor production of Aeschylus' *The Oresteian Trilogy* in 1980, and a 21-hour extravaganza of Goethe's *Faust* I and II for the Hannover World's Fair in 2000. *Wallenstein* compares most importantly with the *Faust* production by way of its fidelity to the text—a feature which many critics at the World's Fair condemned, ridiculing Stein as a kind of cleric holding "church services of the classics." *Wallenstein* was certainly "text-true," as the Germans describe it, but it was by no means ecclesiastically "hyper-realistic." That was especially true of Brandauer's performance in the title role. Strutting about the stage in a suit of armor, field marshal's baton, and a psyche plagued by doubt, the 64-year old Brandauer alternated between a stalwart who

holds the fate of nations in his hands and a scabrous insomniac deliberating on his destiny, tossed between the planets and the stars: “The empire of Saturnus is gone by; Lord of the secret birth of things is he; The time is o’er of brooding and contrivance, For Jupiter, the lustrous, lordeth now, And the dark work, complete of preparation, He draws by force into the realm of light.”

American audience members, though they might understand German, imagined a play written by Thomas Jefferson, perhaps fueled by the imagery of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Brandauer rarely did anything predictable with such language; his vocal range has rarely been on display in films as much as it was in this enormous makeshift theatre space. While his movement was at times stiff (and not only because he was frequently in the suit of armor), his vocal delivery was fluid and resonant. Matching Brandauer almost scene for scene (if not minute by minute, since their roles are smaller) are the supporting leads: the aforementioned Octavio Piccolomini (Peter Fitz), Count Terzky (Daniel Friedrich), Illo (Rainer Philippi), and Buttler (Jürgen Holtz). These four characters remain Wallenstein’s foils throughout the drama, often setting up hurdles for Wallenstein to overcome. Holtz in particular gives an astonishing basso profundo performance as Wallenstein’s nemesis and killer—and his movement is even more restricted than Brandauer’s. Leaning on a cane and often making immobility a virtue, the 74-year old actor momentarily went up on his lines on opening night. But he soon found his balance and the rest of his performance spun out flawlessly.

Does a production like this, with its enormous cost and limited run, signify anything important for the rest of German-language theatre? In the immediate future, probably not. Its scope, star power, and tightly reined focus almost match its enormous budget. But it might betoken a slight nod towards the viability of a performance that at times accords with the written text. In most German productions, the words of the playwright are often at wide variance with

the production's values and performance style. They often battle each other—which has the odd effect of watching two dynamics simultaneously at play: the director's desire to individuate the work, while the actors proceed ineluctably to create characters tangentially related to the words coming out of their mouths. A production like this, which sought to restrain the actors within the confines of the written text, left many audience members with the sensation that they were hearing Schiller's famous aphorisms for the first time, though with a weird echo that came perhaps from their school days, a recent film, or even from a familiar television commercial. That fact alone brought the production much of its unusual and unanticipated positive public response.

--William Grange